(c) Government has not received any such information from Smt. Asha Patil.

(d) Does not arise.

Number of Haj Pilgrims

446. DR V. MAITREYAN : Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) the total number of Haj Pilgrims going to Saudi Arabia every year from India;

(b) whether the passport requirement was not existing till now as per the agreement between both the countries;

(c) whether the Saudi authorities have requested for compulsory passport and visa requirement from the current year; and

(d) if so, whether Government is taking up the matter with the Saudi Authorities and what would be the stand of Government for future Haj Pilgrims to Saudi Arabia?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) The total number of pilgrims proceeded for Haj through the Haj Committee of India during the last five years is as under:

Haj 2005	—	80772
Haj 2006 I	—	99660
Haj 2006 II	—	108816
Haj 2007	—	110415
Haj 2008	—	122116

(b) Yes.

(c) Yes. The Saudi government has informed that all Haj pilgrims should travel on international passport from Haj 2009, on which visa will be endorsed.

(d) The Indian Mission in Saudi Arabia has already taken up the matter with Saudi authorities to defer the requirement of international Passport for Indian Haj pilgrims for one year more.

Issue of transit journey and transit business

447. SHRI MATILAL SARKAR: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the issue of transit journey and transit business from the North- Eastern States to Kolkata through Bangladesh has been taken up with the new Government at Bangladesh very recently;

(b) if so, the results thereof;

(c) whether there has been any development in trades and commerce between India and Bangladesh after institution of Sheikh Hasina Government; and

(d) the commodities getting emphasis during discussion?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE): (a) to (d) EAM visited Bangladesh on February 9, 2009. During his visit he met several leaders of the newly elected government including Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Home Minister, Commerce Minister and Industries Minister of Bangladesh. In his meetings, he discussed issues related to the entire gamut of India's bilateral relation with Bangladesh including connectivity, trade and commerce. During the visit both sides also signed two agreements, namely, Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (BIPPA) and India-Bangladesh Trade Agreement.

Present policy on Middle East

448. SHRI SABIR ALI: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) the details of our present policy with regard to Middle East;

(b) the countries in the Gulf and West Asia with which we have special relations, normal relations and working relations respectively;

(c) the special steps being taken to strengthen our diplomatic staff and assisting staff in that region;

(d) the suggestions/requests/demands received in the matter; and

(e) the action being taken thereon?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) Given the political, strategic and economic importance of the North African, West Asian and Gulf countries and the historical linkages that mark our relations with them, our policy aims to strengthen all aspects of our relations with individual countries of the region as well as with bodies such as the League of Arab States and the Gulf Cooperation Council. With regard to Palestine India has consistently supported Palestine cause and for a peaceful resolution of the West Asian conflict resulting in a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine living within secure and recognized borders, side by side at peace with Israel.

(b) India maintains cordial diplomatic relations with all the countries in the region.

(c) to (e) Requests of Indian Missions and Posts in the Gulf region for augmentation of staff mainly stem from their requirement to service the consular needs of large expatriate Indian populations in these countries.

Cabinet has approved a proposal for augmenting diplomatic and support staff in the Ministry of External Affairs in the long run. This proposal envisages the creation of an additional 175 posts of Officers and 90 posts of support staff (*i.e.* 265 in total) in Indian Missions and Posts abroad, to be spread over the next 10 years. The additional numbers of personnel would be allocated among the various India Missions and Posts on the basis of the specific requirements faced by them, including those for consular activities.